DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 430 122 CE 078 632

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TITLE	Colorado's School-to-Career Program. Issue Brief Number 98-8.
INSTITUTION	Colorado State General Assembly, Denver. Legislative Council.
PUB DATE	1998-08-10
NOTE	5p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Education; *Cooperative Programs; *Education Work Relationship; Educational Legislation; Federal Legislation; Institutional Cooperation; Postsecondary Education; Program Implementation; *School Business Relationship; Secondary Education; *State Programs; *Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS	*Colorado; School to Work Opportunities Act 1994

ABSTRACT

Under the federal School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994, Colorado has created a system of partnerships linking employers and public schools. The state's School-to-Career Partnership started in October 1995 with a 5-year, $24 million grant. Grant funds are distributed by the state to local partnerships of education, business and industry, and community organizations. By August 1998, 81 local partnerships had been formed throughout the state, encompassing approximately 20,000 employers and 130 school districts (involving 89 percent of Colorado public school students). Levels of participation by businesses range from career talks and job shadowing to mentoring, internships, or full apprenticeship. The program also includes active participation by postsecondary institutions. The Colorado General Assembly passed a law in 1997 creating a 10 percent tax credit for investment in a School-to-Career program. Four goals appear to be paramount for School-to-Career partnerships to be successful: (1) support for local partnerships must be created in order to continue the partnerships after the federal funding ends; (2) businesses, parents, educators, and community organizations must be continually educated about the program; (3) increasing the participation of businesses is the key to School-to-Career's future; and (4) follow-up research must be conducted in order to determine what works best in the program. (KC)

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ED 430 122

Colorado
Legislative
Council
Staff

ISSUE BRIEF

Number 98-8 A Legislative Council Publication August 10, 1998

Colorado's School-to-Career Program

by Cathy Eslinger

The federal School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 initiated a grant program and a system of reform that emphasizes cooperation among parents, teachers, and employers, and that prepares students for their role in the workforce. Under the federal act, Colorado has created a system of partnerships linking employers and public schools. This Issue Brief discusses the efforts in Colorado to implement a School-to-Career Partnership, and how those efforts have impacted the state.

Colorado's School-to-Career Partnership is at the Mid-Point of a Five-Year Grant

Colorado's School-to-Career Partnership commenced in October 1995, with a five-year, $24 million grant from the federal departments of education and labor. Staff within the Office of the Lieutenant Governor oversee a state partnership that administers the program. That partnership includes the Colorado Department of Education, the Colorado Community College and Occupational Education System, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education, the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, the Governor's Job Training Office, and the Colorado Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

Grant funds are distributed by the state to local partnerships of education, business and industry, and community organizations. Money may be spent in a wide variety of ways, such as teacher training, computer technology, or curriculum materials, depending on the programs offered by local partnerships.

Eighty-one local partnerships currently comprise the core of Colorado's School-to-Career program. Found in all parts of the state, these partnerships encompass approximately 20,000 employers and 130 school districts. Participating school districts represent roughly 89 percent of Colorado public school students.

Participation in Colorado School-to-Career
1996-97

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Number and percentage of Colorado school districts in a School-to-Career partnership	130	73%
Number and percentage of Colorado students enrolled in participating school districts	509,979	89%
Number and percentage of all Colorado high school students enrolled in work-based learning	31,730	17%
Approximate number and percentage of Colorado employers participating in a School-to-Career partnership	20,000	18%

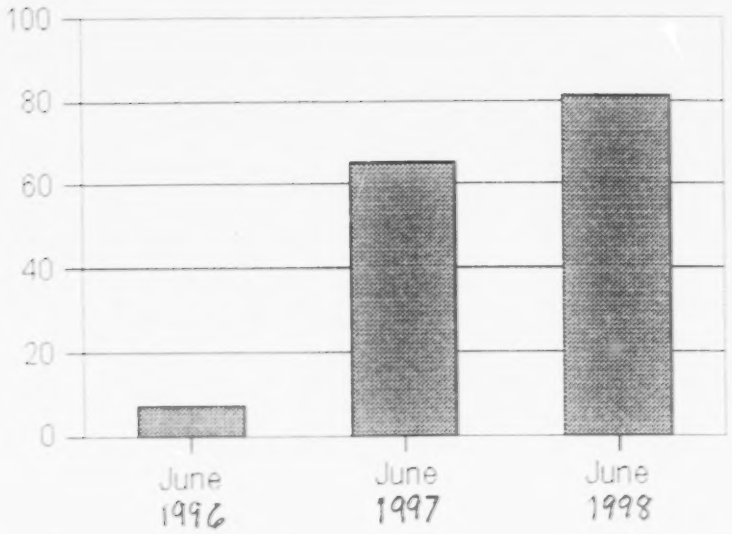
Variety and Flexibility Can Be Found in Local Partnerships

Local School-to-Career partnerships bring together students, teachers, and employers in a variety of ways. Levels of participation by businesses range from career talks and job shadowing opportunities to mentoring, internships, or full apprenticeships. Mentoring usually entails a one-on-one career exploration relationship. Internships may be paid or unpaid, and are often done for school credit. Apprenticeships are often technical in nature and are undertaken following high school graduation. Some partnerships emphasize a student enterprise. For example, in Eagle County, high school students are using hydroponics to grow plants and raise fish. With the Colorado Division of Wildlife as a partner, the enterprise has evolved into a small-scale ecological system known as the Eagle Valley Bio Building.

Colorado's School-to-Career Program Includes Active Participation by Postsecondary Institutions

Postsecondary institutions add yet another element to Colorado's School-to-Career program. Participation by the state's colleges and universities includes development of career knowledge and internship opportunities throughout the curricula, increased attention to the transition between high school and college, and consideration of school-to-career content within teacher education curriculum. Additionally, the Education Commission of the States has chosen Colorado as one of six states to develop a model integrating standards and workplace skills at the postsecondary level.

Number of Local STC Partnerships in Colorado



Recent Sessions of the General Assembly Have Addressed Issues Surrounding School-to-Career

In recent legislative sessions, the Colorado General Assembly has given consideration to School-to-Career issues, especially in the area of tax incentives for employers. Bills providing tax benefits for employer participation in School-to-Career programs died in 1995 and 1996. In 1997, however, HB 97-1152 was signed into law, creating a ten percent tax credit for investment made in a School-to-Career program.

Colorado is certainly not alone in its maintenance of a state School-to-Career partnership. All 50 states and Puerto Rico are now receiving some federal grant money for School-to-Career programs. While some states are still in the development phase, other states have had School-to-Career programs in place for three or four years. Although internship programs have existed for years, an increasing number of states can now point to an organized network wherein students, teachers, and employers can come together.

Local Initiative Holds the Key to the Future of School-to-Career Partnerships

Four goals appear to be paramount for School-to-Career partnerships, both in Colorado and in other states, if they are to be successful long-term. First, support for local partnerships must be cultivated in order to sustain School-to-Career programs when federal funding ends. Federal grants for School-to-Career are considered seed money, leaving responsibility to states and local partnerships to fund future programming.

Second, continued education of businesses, parents, educators, and community organizations about School-to-Career will enhance the program's ability to grow and thrive. Misconceptions about the purpose and goals of School-to-Career partnerships appear to be at least occasional obstacles for the program's advocates.

Third, increasing the participation of businesses will be key to School-to-Career's future. With approximately one percent of the nation's employers involved in a School-to-Career partnership, there is still enormous room for growth. Colorado, with roughly 18 percent employer participation, has done better than average in recruiting business support.

Finally, in Colorado at least, one emerging goal appears to fall in the area of follow-up research. In order to discern what approaches and activities are working most successfully, there is interest in following students' academic and professional pursuits after graduation. For example, Jefferson County School District, which participates in a School-to-Career partnership, has implemented a data exchange project with the Department of Labor and Employment and the Commission on Higher Education. This data exchange allows the district to address questions such as which curriculum and extra-curricular activities correlate with positive post-secondary or employment outcomes.

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